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Acing the Art of Transformation: Change on the ACE Campus

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Walk into any one of the classrooms at the Academy of Citizenship and Empowerment at the Tyee Educational Complex and you will see students writing intensely. You will hear them discussing their ideas with passion, and you will feel the electricity of students using their minds well. Yet, only three years ago, these same classrooms were part of what was then a failing Tyee High School, and the students you would encounter on that campus were far from engaged in their learning. How, in such a short period of time, has this place become so different and so totally transformed?

This sort of change didn't happen accidentally, and it certainly didn't happen overnight. The successes that ACE students experience are the result of an intentional and relentless dedication to change from what was once a tired and impersonal system to a school that cares about the learning of each and every community member.

Transformation of Belief

As other "conversion schools" across our nation will tell you, transforming what was a large, impersonal, comprehensive high school into three CES small schools was not a simple task. Before the actual conversion of Tyee ever began, dedicated teachers and administrators dissatisfied with the culture of low expectations began researching reform models all over the nation. The Research and Design (RAD) Team visited successful small schools in New York and Oakland, read countless studies and Horace articles, and explored a variety of reform philosophies and practices. The RAD Team and Tyee administrators brought CES to the Tyee campus. Coaches from CES Northwest began meeting with us regularly in the library, and teachers discussed the 10 Common Principles in adult learning teams. Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) sprouted all over campus, and after only one year of membership in CES, most members of the Tyee staff were involved in the positive collegial relationships CFG's provide. The enthusiastic RAD Team even encouraged the entire staff to read Deborah Meier's *The Power of Their Ideas* over the summer.

Before the conversion could even begin, the RAD Team and principal Max Silverman knew that a transformation in belief had to happen within the adults in the building. It would have been futile to attempt to move from a large structure to smaller ones without first changing what the Tyee teachers believed was possible for students. CES provided Tyee teachers with guiding philosophies that fit with their own. Tyee teachers were able to recognize when learning was strong, but they hadn't been able to understand it so it could be replicated in other situations. Tyee teachers initially decided to focus on two CES Common Principles – learning to use one's mind well and personalization – as those most immediately needed on the campus. Having common beliefs, language, and principles centered on student achievement was exactly what was needed to effect large-scale change at Tyee.

Transformation of Practice

When preparing to open ACE in the fall of 2005, teachers met with new principal Stacy Spector to plan the ways they would take on the enormous task of starting a new, academically rigorous school within the walls of what was an ineffective school. Together and democratically, teachers and administrators decided that what they had control over as educators was their teaching practice. They knew that improved pedagogy would lead to improved learning, and this meant that everyone in the building – teachers, administrators, counselors, support staff, paraprofessionals, interpreters, and custodians – would take on roles as learners. As a result, time, money, staffing, and all other school resources were dedicated to one goal: improving student learning. Staff meetings were spent reading professional texts and engaging in thoughtful discourse, rather than debating what the "discipline referral" should look like, as was done at Tyee. Early release and waiver days were also dedicated to professional learning. Teachers, counselors, and administrators looked at formal and informal student data in order to better inform practice.

ACE is also part of many professional networks and partnerships, including CES and the Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington. All ACE teachers are involved with some sort of embedded coaching with literacy, writing, or mathematical consultants that serve to help them hone their practice. In addition to outside consultants, ACE literacy coaches and language arts teachers Alexis McFarland and Jodie Wiley work with teachers in their classrooms on a regular basis to offer observations and to help work through pedagogical dilemmas. With ACE teachers, they plan ways to employ proven methods and theories that create best classroom practices.

As ACE teachers spent over a week developing and aligning their graduation competencies for each content area during the summer of 2007, it became clear that this truly was a collaborative team of learners. The feedback and intellectual inspiration teachers were able to offer one another proves that when teachers work together in deep and thoughtful ways, with the goal of helping all students to be ready for college, career, and citizenship, magic happens. As they enter into their third year as a small school, ACE teachers are using these competencies to rethink and redesign their curricula. ACE teachers are as engaged in learning as the students are. Often, students are sitting side-by-side with adults engaging in a shared conversation about data, teaching practice, and clearly identified outcomes for student proficiency.

Transformation of Structures

In 2005, at the close the school's first year, ACE teachers noticed that while they were each working diligently in their own content areas to engage students in rigorous thinking, students lacked a sense of academic continuity. The ways in which information was presented and explored in social studies wasn't the same as it was in math or language arts. As a result of looking at student work and talking with students in summer professional learning sessions, ACE teachers decided that they needed to agree upon and employ shared learning structures that would better help students both access learning and develop the skills to advocate for their own learning. They realized that when students were spending their cognitive energy trying to figure out where to sit or what the unspoken academic expectations in each classroom were, they were not able to fully engage their minds on the real learning they needed to be doing.

As a result, ACE teachers agreed to employ a set of learning structures in their classrooms and to share a common language around these. All ACE students know how to engage in a "fishbowl" conversation or how to come to the meeting area for a mini-lesson. Their behaviors during independent work time are intentionally different than those they display when having a peer conference. So while they may be learning the causes of the Korean War in U.S. history class or practicing titration in chemistry, ACE students are using the same learning and thinking strategies in both to best demonstrate and explore their ideas.

ACE students do more than just use these structures; they know why these strategies are important to their learning. As a result, they can advocate better for the ways in which they learn best. Literacy teacher Michelle Lobb recalled with pleasure that her 11th grade language arts students asked her to provide them with a mentor text for their writing assignment and a guided mini-lesson around it. Senior leaders at ACE ask younger students in class to "come to the circle" for class meetings around the culture of learning in a math classroom. The common language and structures that are used to access learning at ACE are now as much a part of its culture as any mascot or school traditions ever could be.

Transformation of Culture

What is most evident to the variety of visitors to the ACE campus is the dedication to learning that is at the heart of the culture. Peek into ACE classroom and you hear students debating the merits of a film director's use of a particular camera angle in a poignant scene. In another, you see students working to build stable towers in math class using limited physical resources. Move across the hall and you will see English Language Learners talking with confidence about their thinking around the books they are reading. Even the hallways at ACE are places for learning and thinking. Couches and meeting areas in the hallways are often filled with students before, after, and during school hours who are talking about their reading, sharing their thinking and opinions, debating topics of importance to them, planning a project, or even teaching one another.

This culture of learning is not unidirectional, not just promoted by teachers and accepted by students. ACE students work hard to own, promote, and teach the culture to others. ACE students write their own newspaper, *The Deliberator*, create the school's quarterly newsletter, design and create the bulletin boards,

website, brochures, t-shirts and yearbook, all of which are saturated with the message that learning is an essential part of ACE's identity.

In the winter of 2006, less than a year after ACE's opening, a teacher left and was replaced by a long-term substitute unfamiliar with the culture of learning. Angry students felt they weren't being challenged, and complained to the principal about the teacher not meeting their standards. Spector encouraged them to see this as a learning opportunity, and some students worked with the new teacher to adopt ACE structures and culture. The following year, when another ACE teacher left mid-year, students knew what to do. Then juniors Kiana Fola and Maria Breux led all classes taught by the new long-term substitute in class meetings, and encouraged students to use this experience as an opportunity to remake their learning in this class. It is clear that ACE students see this as their school and know that it is up to them, not the principal, nor the other teachers, to educate newcomers about how to learn and grow in this environment.

Because they were so dedicated to teaching this culture of learning to incoming students, last year's seniors created a mentorship program wherein upperclassmen worked one-on-one with ninth graders to acclimate them into ACE's culture in a personal way. Those alumni have been back numerous times to train this year's seniors in mentorship so that the program can continue to develop. This year, ACE students and teachers will work to continue the progress of the Mentorship Program and will look for ways to both celebrate and extend ACE's culture of learning.

While ACE has transformed the hallways and classrooms of what was once Tyee High School in dramatic and irreversible ways, it will not become complacent in its success. Continuing work within the Coalition of Essential Schools, ACE looks forward to its developing relationship with Young Women's Leadership Academy in Chicago (ACE's Mentor School through the CES Small Schools network) and to the upcoming opportunities at Fall Forum in Denver. In October, ACE will have a Critical Friends Visit, during which staff members from CES, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Young Women's Leadership Academy will help ACE as it works on its essential question this year: "What evidence is there of students engaging in a community of authentic teaching and learning?" ACE is a continually transforming place where working to improve student learning and questioning the status quo are the only things that have remained constant. While ACE teachers and students struggle to say exactly how ACE will look and sound years from now, one thing is certain – it will be a better place, one that has been transformed by learning.

Author Carrie Howell on coaching:

As an ACE language arts teacher, I have engaged in multiple and varied professional development opportunities. From local trainings on how to use different writing programs to National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) conferences, I have experienced them all. However, none of the professional learning I have experienced as a teacher has been more transformative than my work with embedded coaches in my classroom. I regularly engage in two- to four-day cycles with literacy coaches and consultants. What I appreciate most about this method of professional learning is that it is specific to where my students are and where I am in my learning. It is through this personalized professional development that I have grown and changed the most as a teacher.

The Academy of Citizenship and Empowerment is in its third year of existence after converting from comprehensive Tyee High School in the fall of 2005. The 365 ACE students are ethnically diverse: 22 percent of our student body is Asian/Pacific Islander, 23 percent is Black, 26 percent is Hispanic, 29 percent is Caucasian, and less than 1 percent is Native American. More than 70 percent of the students are on the Free/Reduced Lunch program.

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